Manifesta 7
Trentino–South Tyrol, Italy
19 July — 2 November

This edition of Manifesta, established in 1996 as a meeting point between Eastern and Western European artists, was held in the autonomous Trentino–Alto Adige region of northern Italy, a mountainous border territory with a turbulent history. Normally based in a single city, the nomadic biennial reflects the particularities of each place; in fact, the 2006 exhibition, designated for politically volatile Nicotera, was cancelled at the last minute because of friction between the local organisers and the multinational curators.

Titled 100 Miles in 100 Days, this year's ambitious exhibition is the first to be scattered among various cities – Bolzano, Trento and Rovereto – and was as good, and as overwhelming, as its organisation was chaotic.

The politically complicated host region, also referred to as Südtirol, was part of Austria-Hungary until its annexation by Italy in 1919, and roughly half of the people still speak German in spite of an intensive Italianisation programme carried out by Benito Mussolini, which was cut short by the Second World War. Nevertheless, much of the German-speaking population was forcibly relocated to the Third Reich before returning, and the tensions are still palpable in the form of a sort of cultural schizophrenia. Each Italian place name has a German counterpart, such as Bozen for Bolzano, where you speak Italian to someone in a shop, they often look at you strangely or attempt to answer in some sort of pigeon hybrid. Thus it is impossible here to avoid pondering the randomness of political borders and the converging of cultures over history – and what that means in terms of personal identity and subjective reality.

The location that is most evocative – and symbolic – of the overall context is the Habsburg Fortezza/Franzensfeste, situated between Bolzano and the Brenner Pass on one of Europe’s most strategic travel routes. In spite of its physical construction as a strong defence barrier, the fortress never actually witnessed a battle, spurring the exhibition’s reflection on manifestations of visibility and imagination, and immateriality versus materiality. The disappointing collaborative show, Scenarios, highlighted several ephemeral sound pieces in three different languages – Italian, German, and English – where you had to wait until each was recounted in your own or find the appropriate listening station and put your ear up to it. Mostly I wandered through the maze of empty rooms seeking something to sink my teeth into.

The exhibition in Trento, The Soul, touches on the problem of European integration and proposes an interior frontier focusing on the borders between inside and outside. Again here, the space itself bears out the theme most eloquently: in the former Fascist building Palazzo delle Poste, a hybrid of styles that encompasses the structures of a 19th century Austro-Hungarian post office and a Renaissance villa. In a labyrinthine exhibition full of videos, the most striking is the installation ‘Dawn Chorus’, 2007, by Marcus Coates, several large-scale slow-motion portraits of people in their mundane native habitats – office, bed, kitchen – mimicking birdsong at dawn. Five curious mock museums are staged in various rooms, such as the ‘Museum of European Normality’ and the ‘Museum of Projective Personality’, pedantic instruments to highlight the theme. Far more effective is ‘Following Room (Trento)’, 2008, by American artist Beth Campbell: a space full of identical rooms of IKEA-like furniture whose dividers seem to be mirrors but are merely glass that revealed seemingly identical – or
mass-produced personal identities, in spite of its repetitiveness, it is fascinating and contemplative, somehow even comforting.

Down the street a mosaic frieze on a building facade is inscribed with a Fascist dedication in which Mussolini’s name has been clearly gouged out of the stone.

The three other main exhibitions are hosted in rehabilitated ex-industrial buildings. ‘The Rest of Now’, in the Ex-Alumix on the outskirts of Bolzano, is dedicated appropriately to the beauty and artefacts of obsolescence, to the relativity of time and space. Among the many strong installations populating the cavernous open space, Zhinhas Kempinis‘ “Skylight Tower”, 2008, stops time in the form of unspooled videotape strips hanging from the central skylight, both ephemeral and concrete, embodying the projected light in negative.

In ‘The Ethics of Dust’, 2008, Jorge Otero-Pailos creates a gorgeous parchement-like façade by transferring the accumulations of pollution since the 1930s from the windows to latex casts, preserving the residue of time as an archaeological artifact. Meg Stuart’s ‘The Only Possible City’, 2008, ponders the importance of timing to the meaning of things by recording herself facing the camera and simply being in the former aluminium factory, where reportedly the clocks and electronic devices did not work because of the magnetic fields. In the

The exhibition Principle Hope, organised by Adam Budak, occupies two separate spaces in Rovereto. A highlight at the centre of the ex-Peterlini space, a small former cocoa factory, is Knut Åsdam’s ‘Oblique’, 2008, a meditative video projected in a plant-filled enclosure fortified by high chain-link fences in which diverse protagonists travelling together on a train through a generic urban landscape – a suspended, timeless space – call to mind the collective urge toward moving, dreaming and belonging. In the courtyard of the sprawling Manifattura Tabacchi, a former tobacco factory, giant black balloons hover above Tim Etchells’s ‘Art Flavours’, 2008, a cart serving free gelato. At the far end is a spectacular giant façade of vivid flames, ‘Schumann Machine’, 2008, behind which Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson sings a piece from the composer’s ‘Dichterliebe’ accompanied by a pianist in a loop intended as an ironic lament of the ruins of the past that comes off as merely trite.

The maze of interior spaces buzzes with activity, including the station ‘Copy-Right No Copy-Right’, 2007, by Italian collective Alterazioni Video, which questions the concept of intellectual property, by handing out free copies of films and music of your choice. Inspiring but visually overwhelming is Christian Philipp Müller’s ‘Green Border’, 1993, which touches on the issue of national

difference: when I tried to speak Italian with the German-speaking driver of an exhibition shuttle, he responded in a mocking mixture of the two languages. Another driver was clearly Italian, but an argument ensued when his itinerary was contrary to the official press programme and he refused to change it without a word from his boss. But then it became clear that he had no directions at all to the exhibition venue when he stopped the bus to ask some roadworkers the way.

Like the geopolitical context, this multicultural experience is an essential part of the Biennale, a performance verité that illustrates the overall theme of European integration more effectively than the artwork itself.

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Far left: Libia Castro & Olafur Eliasson, ‘Uterus Flag’, 2008, outdoor installation Left: Ragnar Kjartansson, ‘Schumann Machine’/’All he wanted to do was to masturbate and eat truffles’, 2008, performance and installation

Bottom right: Marcus Coates, ‘Dove Chorus’, 2006